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C O N F I D E N T I A L ASMARA 000138

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/EX AND AF/E

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/29/2019

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SUBJECT: ICRC UNDER NEW PRESSURE FROM ISAIAS REGIME

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4(d)

11. (C) NO FUEL, NO TRAVEL PERMITS

ICRC, which has a relatively large and active program in Eritrea, has long been seen as unusually favored by the Isaias regime, which dislikes NGOs and is contemptuous of UN agencies. For no apparent reason, ICRC is now being pressured and restricted by the authorities. Having not received government of Eritrea permission to buy diesel fuel for over a year, the ICRC started to import gasoline-powered SUVs. One of these new vehicles has been confiscated over a licensing spat. More ominously, ICRC international staff have recently seen most of their requests for travel permits denied by Eritrean authorities. Heretofore ICRC staff enjoyed almost unfettered access to the countryside, but now are finding it difficult to travel to project sites and conduct visits and routine ICRC activities.

12. (C) NO MORE REPATRIATIONS

Due to Ethiopian administrative glitches and subsequent Eritrean political pique, ICRC has had to halt its repatriation program that has sent thousands of stranded Ethiopian and Eritrean citizens back home across the border. This ends perhaps the last cooperative activity between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The Asmara-based ICRC director (please protect) told the ambassador April 28 that due to a number of Ethiopian-requested postponements of scheduled repatriations, Eritrea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed ICRC last month that the long-established program would be ended. The ICRC director said Eritrea felt it was being jerked around by Ethiopia, its pride was injured, and it therefore reacted by terminating the successful program.

13. (C) WHY? "ETHIOPIA HAS NOT GIVEN BACK BADME"

The exasperated ICRC director was assured by senior Eritrean authorities that "it's nothing personal." He was told ICRC has done nothing wrong, it was only that, according to one supposedly sympathetic official, "Ethiopia has not given back Badme, so pressure on the international community will have to be increased."

MCMULLEN